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SUBJECT: A Mixed Bag for Vietnam's Catholics in the Northwest

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Recent visits to Catholic congregations in Vietnam's Northwest Highlands highlighted inconsistent implementation of the legal framework on religion at the provincial, district and commune levels. Poloff, accompanied by Pol Specialist and Pol Intern, visited the towns of Moc Chau and Son La in Son La Province, and Dien Bien Phu in Dien Bien Province in late July/early August. Each visit illustrated the different levels of freedom for Catholic followers in these communities and reinforced the need for continued focus on these remote areas to gain needed progress on religious freedom in the region. End Summary.

Moc Chau's Catholics Acknowledge Improvements

¶2. (U) The Moc Chau Catholic congregation began meeting in secret in the 1990's. As the GVN became more permissive toward religious groups, the congregation went public in 2003 and has experienced a steady increase in the number of congregants. Today, the basement level chapel in the home of two congregation members, Mr. Nha and Ms. Hong, welcomes 200-300 worshipers for regular Sunday services. On Holy Days of Obligation and holidays, the chapel struggles to accommodate 400-600 worshipers, many coming from as far as 40 km away for these special services.

¶3. (SBU) Mr. Nha acknowledges that conditions for this congregation have improved in recent years, particularly since the visit of the Bishop in 2005, but notes that four other sub-congregations in Moc Chau district have not been so lucky. He explained that commune and village level officials outside of the district headquarters are still deeply suspicious of the Catholic sub-congregations and routinely hamper their ability to meet and worship.

¶4. (SBU) Mr. Nga stated that while Moc Chau district officials observed the Moc Chau congregation closely over the past year, they now seem more relaxed towards the congregants. Still, many Catholic followers in the Moc Chau district are reticent to worship in public, fearing discrimination in their ability to access to school and employment. Children of the congregants participate in catechism classes during the summer months taught by visiting teachers, though this activity is not reported to local authorities. The congregation focuses on charitable work within the Catholic community and on occasion reaches out to non-Catholics. When the congregation offers to participate in projects for the community as a group, district officials refuse their assistance.

¶5. (SBU) When asked about local officials' level of education on religion and understanding of the Catholic faith, the congregation told poloff that both greatly vary among local authorities, leading to abuse of the more remote congregations. Though the congregation warmly welcomed visits by the U.S. officials, the congregation members emphasized that the increased attention alone will not change the minds of the local officials. More needs to be done to improve the education and capacity of local officials, noted one church member, adding that acceptance and community integration

"will take a lot of time."

Son La's Catholics Suffer Local Officials' Ignorance

¶16. (SBU) The situation for Catholics in the Quyet Thang precinct, Son La town, Son La province, is decidedly more difficult. Local officials attempted to prevent poloff from meeting with a group of seven Catholics gathered at a local residence, insisting that poloff was violating neighborhood regulations by not notifying local officials in advance. Poloff noted that both national and provincial government authorities were informed of the meeting and continued into the residence. Upon being seated, the group was quickly joined by several plain-clothed security police and the Chairman of the precinct People's Committee.

¶17. (U) The Chairman insisted again that local regulations were being violated and asked for the purpose of the visit. Upon being told poloff was interested in the religious life of the Catholic congregation, the Chairman asserted that there are no Catholics in Son La, no places of religious worship, adding that "these things cannot exist unless they are registered." One of the Catholics present interjected that the Catholic congregation has applied many times to register without success.

¶18. (U) Poloff noted that Vietnam's legal framework on religion permits religious groups to meet and worship prior to registration. The PC Chairman directed poloff to change topics. After a brief, perfunctory exchange about socio-economic conditions and social issues, the PC Chairman stated the meeting was over as time had expired.

¶19. (U) As the Chairman led the way out of the residence, poloff was able to step into the next room and visit the chapel. Several Catholic congregants expressed their thanks for the visit, noting

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the importance of outsiders witnessing how difficult conditions are for the congregation. One member noted that the last time a priest came to conduct mass services, armed security officials were present. During the brief discussion, a security official conveyed a telephonic message from the PC Chairman that poloff should leave immediately. Poloff and the Catholic congregants continued conversing while walking out to the street, but were unable to conduct any further discussions of substance.

Dien Bien's Catholics Poised for Community Integration

¶10. (U) The Catholic congregation of Noong Het commune, Dien Bien Dong district, Dien Bien Province, on the other hand, is able to meet and worship without interference and has a wholly different relationship with local neighborhood officials. The congregation meets regularly on Sundays in the home Mr. Nguyen Ba Huan. The chapel, a small room adjoining the family business, receives 80-90 people for normal Sunday services and 200-300 for worship on the Holy Days of Obligation. A priest visits the congregation once a month for services, as well as for funerals and weddings. Unlike the Catholic congregation in Moc Chau, the children of the Noong Het congregation do not attend catechism in the local chapel. Mr. Huan explained that, "there is no catechism here. It is not appropriate yet because officials have not recognized us. Children have to go to our native provinces to get catechism classes to prepare for their First Communion and go to Hanoi for their First Communion service."

¶11. (SBU) Congregation members told poloff that they applied for registration in March 2007 and then waited to start meeting regularly until November 2007, noting that they wanted to give officials ample time to approve their application. To date, they have yet to receive a response. In Mr. Huan's opinion, "the provincial officials ignore the congregation's presence on purpose," and remain cautious about any acknowledgement of them.

¶12. (SBU) At the commune level, the authorities are well aware of the congregation's presence and activities. The commune's deputy

police chief, Mr. Vu Van Yen, joined the meeting and contributed to the discussion in an open and frank manner. Further, congregants did not hesitate to share their views and ask questions in his presence. Mr. Yen noted that he visits the chapel regularly, adding that he has attended Mass and Christmas celebrations. He views it his responsibility and pleasure to mingle with different people in the community. When asked about his views on the Catholic congregation in Noong Het, Yen remarked, "I think they actually are positive for the community and I see no problems. I have a lot of respect for the people here. The men come from Catholic families which is why they continue their traditions here. However, it is important that the local officials take time to review their registration application as this is a sensitive matter."

¶13. (SBU) Several congregants stated that they understand why province and district officials look at them with caution; however, they assert that the time has come to officially recognize them as part of the community. Mr. Huan told poloff, "We fully understand why eyes have been on us. We have been behaving ourselves. Catholicism is new to Vietnam but not new to the world. Look at what we have done and how we can be in the future so we can be one with our community. We openly invite officials to have a closer look at our congregation and its activities so we can become recognized."

¶14. (SBU) Comment: The atmosphere and substance of the three meetings could not have been more different, highlighting yet again the uneven and inconsistent implementation of Vietnam's legal framework on religion. Congregations in Dien Bien and, to a certain extent, Moc Chau, appear to be making progress in their relationships with local officials. Poloff met with the Moc Chau congregation without any officials in the room while the Dien Bien congregation warmly welcomed the deputy police chief to the open and lively discussion. While both congregations still await official registration, they meet, worship, conduct services and maintain chapels, largely without the presence of or interference from local authorities. Both were also quick to note that this represented a significant improvement over several years ago, when they met in secret and were unable to acknowledge their faith publicly.

¶15. (SBU) The congregation in Son La town, however, continues to suffer under heavy-handed local officials who appear intent on denying the existence of the congregation and preventing them from discussing their plight with outsiders. The congregants, determined to continue their religious practice, show little apprehension or fear when confronted by local officials. The owner of the residence housing their chapel invited poloff and other embassy officials for Christmas services, noting that continued visits will eventually force local authorities to acknowledge the existence of the congregation. While post continues to push for the full

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implementation of the legal framework with the national government, it is increasingly evident that greater engagement with provincial, district and other local officials in the Northwest Highlands will be necessary to advance religious freedom in the region.